Volvo in 'killer brakes' inquiry

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PARIS - The Swedish car-maker Volvo - famed for the solidity and reliability of its cars - is facing a manslaughter investigation for allegedly covering up a grave defect in the brakes of thousands of cars.

The case arises from a horrific road accident two years ago, when two children were crushed to death by a Volvo 850 TDI which ran out of control in a narrow street.

The accident remains the subject of great bitterness in the small town of Wasselonne, near Strasbourg, France.

The driver of the car, Catherine Kohtz, a wealthy woman married to a German vet, is still blamed by many local people for the deaths of the two 10-year-old children, who came from relatively poor families.

She has received anonymous death threats, accusing her of being a "bourgeois assassin" and using her wealth and influence to escape blame.

But an investigating magistrate has decided that Ms Kohtz is herself an innocent victim of Volvo's failure to correct a serious problem in the braking system of 180,000 cars, sold all over the world - a quarter in the UK.

Representatives of Volvo France have been summoned to a meeting with the magistrate, Gabriel Steffanus, on 30 May.

It is expected that the company will be placed under formal investigation one step short of a charge for "involuntary homicide" or manslaughter.

This would be the first time that a car company has faced a criminal investigation of this kind in France.

Volvo documents seized by police at the Strasbourg dealership that sold Ms Kohtz's car indicate that the manufacturer was aware of a brake defect of "very great importance" in some Volvo 854s.

A rubber pipe in the hydraulic braking system was capable of tearing or detaching itself.

Instead of recalling the cars, it is alleged, Volvo asked its dealers in July 1997 to correct the fault during routine service visits.

The Strasbourg garage carried out the work - without informing Ms Kohtz's husband, Hartmut - in 1998.

Investigators say that the instructions from Volvo were so vague that the work was carried out incorrectly.

Ms Kohtz says that when she tried to brake on 17 June 1999, as she drove at about 25 mph down a street in Wasselonne, the pedal failed to respond. The more she pumped the pedal, the stiffer and more unresponsive it became.

Her car collided with a Renault and half-turned over, crushing three children against another car. Two died, the third was seriously injured.

- INDEPENDENT